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Honorable Alison J. Nathan
United States District Court
Southern District of New York
500 Pearl Street
New York, NY 10007

Dear Judge Nathan,

We, Zoe Stahl and Nora Stephens, write in support of Nico Burrell, who is a graduate of The Focus Forward Project. The Focus Forward Project is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing an educational curriculum focused on reentry for federal pretrial inmates and those under pretrial supervision. The 12-week course is designed to provide both an intellectual and emotional outlet for students as they navigate the stress and uncertainty of the pretrial phase of their federal cases. The class meets once a week for two hours, and participants complete weekly reading, journal, and other homework assignments. The first half of each class is spent discussing and connecting with themes in the memoir, *A Long Way Gone*, by Ishmael Beah, who was a boy soldier in the Sierra Leone civil war, while the second half of each class focuses on life skills, highlighting a different one each week. By the end of the course, participants will have gained a variety of transferable skills and tools, including, but not limited to: a completed resume, interview skills, conflict resolutions skills, public speaking skills, and the setting of both short and long-term goals. The mission of The Focus Forward Project is to provide participants with the confidence and practical tools to successfully move forward in their lives.

From the very beginning, we were impressed by Nico's intelligence, ambition, and dedication. In our first class, Nico shared that he had waited nearly two years to enroll in the Focus Forward Program and that he had just finished reading his 77th book while at MCC. From this

introduction, we learned about Nico's persistence, resilience, and deep drive to self-improve.

Nico was true to his first impression. During discussions of *A Long Way Gone*, he always shared his thoughts and perspective, provoking in-depth discussions about the nature of trauma, the importance of goal-setting, and the impact of one's family situation. Given Nico's ability to share vulnerable moments from his life, particularly when making connections between the book and the world, it is not surprising that Nico became a leader to the rest of the class. Other students looked up to Nico and would often look to him when talking through difficult personal situations. During the life skills portion of the class, Nico always offered various tips and suggestions to his fellow classmates. When discussing tips to build self-confidence, Nico shared ways he stays positive: to focus on always improving himself, to not letting others' words impact his goals, and to staying physically fit. These tips are hard for anyone to do, let alone someone in jail, and we were impressed to see Nico consistently following his own advice.

Nico continued to serve as a leader during the public speaking portion of the course, always volunteering to be one of the students to speak first when others were too nervous to do so. In his speech, Nico thoughtfully explained how jail has impacted him and how he plans to make the most of his current situation. The speech was incredibly well-written and well-organized—each paragraph featured a topic sentence and specific examples, and each paragraph further built on his overall narrative. Even more, Nico had clearly practiced giving his speech. He knew what words to emphasize, when to speak more slowly, and when to look up to make eye contact with the audience. His speech—both its content and its delivery—resonated with many of his fellow students. Lastly, Nico's love of and talent for music was evident in his speech, which was very lyrical. It was inspiring to see Nico connect his passion for music with his overall goal of leaving the criminal justice system and serving as a positive force in the world.

It feels fitting then that as a class leader and one of the group's most talented public speakers, Nico's fellow students elected Nico to serve as one of two speakers at our Focus Forward graduation. Once again, Nico impressed us with his speech. Nico spoke beautifully about what he and his classmates have received from the Focus Forward course, including

a sense of community, a deeper ability to relate with others and talk through the difficulties of one's life, and an increased drive to learn more and be good to those around him. Nico shared he had re-written and edited this graduation speech for weeks—he wanted it to be perfect, and it was. The graduation audience of his fellow students, attorneys, and BOP staff, gave him a standing ovation as some of them wiped tears from their eyes. Focus Forward's Interim Director was present and asked Nico for the speech so that he can share it with others as an example of the great work completed by Focus Forward students. Nico's speech clearly demonstrated that he had truly learned and had internalized the lessons from Focus Forward.

Since the fall, we have come to see just how intrinsically motivated Nico is. Nico is motivated by love for his family. For example, when asked about one of his favorite life moments, Nico talked about teaching his younger nephew how to swim. Nico explained that teaching his nephew something difficult, and something that he can use for the rest of his life, was powerful to him and that he felt grateful for the opportunity. Furthermore, almost every week, Nico shared that he had completed one or two more books, that he had continued adding more crunches and push-ups to his daily work-out routine to ensure he stays healthy, and that he had not just completed each and every Focus Forward assignment but did it with the utmost seriousness and attention. We are confident that Nico's motivation will serve him well, allowing him to act as a positive force for himself, and his family, when he leaves the criminal justice system.

Your Honor, our intent is to provide you with our experience with Nico, who we have had the pleasure to know since this past fall. We appreciate the time Your Honor has taken to read our letter. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us directly at the numbers listed below.

Sincerely,

/s/Zoe Stahl
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